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Feeling Festive

by Jennifer L. Nelson

Forget party hats; today's kids want paparazzi and videogame trucks.

Anyone who has ever attended an extravagant children's birthday party that resembled a typical wedding knows that the days of kids getting together in the backyard with pizza and piñatas may be long gone.

Popular reality shows like *My Super Sweet 16* only demonstrate the ongoing trend by showcasing the

biggest, most over-the-top parties to celebrate those special moments in a child's life. When it comes to planning a birthday or graduation party, many parents are looking to mark their kids' occasions with lavish, customized events that fit each child's unique tastes.

Betsy Fischer saw a need for a local venue that could accommodate such desires, so she opened up the Groove Lounge in Voorhees, offering themed events that include dance, karaoke, game show and Zumba parties for kids and teens—and all within a nightclub-inspired venue adorned with a disco ball, animal-print lounge sofas and a bar, where partygoers can enjoy soda and non-alcoholic daiquiris and other frozen drinks. "It does look a little bit like a 1970s nightclub, but that's completely lost on a 4-year-old," says Voorhees resident Tami Bogutz Steinberg, who hosted her daughter Ariel's 4th birthday party recently at Groove Lounge.

"When adults are dancing, they want a dark room with flashing lights and good music ... and that's what teenagers want, too. They see movies, they go to parties, they listen to music, and they like to dance," says Nanette Tingley, also of Voorhees, who was more than happy to host her daughter Allie's Sweet 16 party at Groove Lounge as opposed to some of the alternatives. "To me, it's a safe place to do what they want to do without being exposed to the other elements or risks of being in a real nightclub," she says.

Like many parents, Tingley had firsthand exposure to the kinds of parties her daughter's friends were hosting, and opted to skip the exorbitant price tag attached to many hotels, catering halls, and other venues when it came time to plan her daughter's Sweet 16. "This party was totally geared toward teens—they just wanted to dance, and I didn't want to spend \$30 per plate on a sit-down dinner party for kids," she says.

However, hosting an event at one of South Jersey's hottest party venues often comes at a premium. Though their all-inclusive packages include everything from pizza to paper products to party favors, the Groove Lounge's pricing begins at \$550 for up to 24 children, with a variety of add-ons for parents to choose from, from magicians and fortune tellers to face painting and costumed characters. "I've definitely had some prospects tell me that our party is too expensive for them ... but our product and venue certainly aren't cheap, and we don't want to be the cheapest venue in town," Fischer asserts. "We know that what we provide is a very high-quality experience for both kids and adults."

Then there are venues like Sweet and Sassy, a children's salon, retail store, and party venue in Cherry Hill that offers eight different party themes targeted to girls ages 4 through 12. For the youngest clients, the Magical Fairy Party comes in at \$329, while the Ultimate Spa Party, designed for older girls, is \$429; packages include glittery makeovers, take-home gifts, and plenty of themed activities.

But it's Sweet and Sassy's add-ons that serve as the proverbial cherry on top of its glamorous salon services and party packages—its most popular offering is a hot pink limo, available for round-trips (\$150) or for a 20-minute ride around Cherry Hill (\$75). According to owner Christine Gorham, girls love getting dolled up with up-dos, makeovers and manicures before walking the shop's signature red carpet and having photos taken by the "paparazzi." "We love to make birthday parties memorable," Gorham says. "They have lots of fun dressing up, dancing and walking the runway with their friends."

For those that wonder if these luxuries are over the top for some children, there's no underestimating the influence of pop culture on birthday party themes for kids, from television to music to celebrity obsession. "Kids are much more savvy these days ... a pizza, ice cream and cake party doesn't offer the action or entertainment that today's generation demands," agrees Suzanne Sykes, owner of the Cape May Courthouse-based Kid Parties to Go.

Voorhees resident Natalie Sannuti, owner of Pretty Princess Parties, knows all about the fascination little girls have with either princesses or the celebrity lifestyle—depending on their age—and her parties include everything from visits with Tinkerbell and Cinderella and hair and manicure stations, to red carpet runways and diva dress-up. "A 7-year-old girl wants to walk the red carpet and be a movie star ... it's pretty normal," she says.

When launching her business five years ago, Sannuti aimed to fill another need within the event planning industry: the trend of livening up a home-based party with an outside contractor. Pretty Princess Parties are hosted in the family's home, and include crafts, karaoke, dress-up and more—Sannuti and her team organize everything from individual activity stations to cleaning up afterward. "We like to target the everyday mom who does it all ... we go into their homes and host the party from beginning to end, so parents can sit back and enjoy their child's special day."

Though some of today's most common party themes may be inspired by adult activities, like spa treatments and nightclubs, party offerings are tailored to be age-appropriate. "When they're 10 years old, their idea of playing dress-up includes feather boas and dance recital costumes," says Mount Laurel's Betsy Turgeon, who celebrated her daughter Gabrielle's 10th birthday with Pretty Princess Parties. "Everything is kid-centered, from the Justin Bieber cardboard cut-out to the Kidz Bop music."

Kid Parties to Go also brings the party to the child, and specializes in hosting elaborate events complete with bounce houses, carnival games, costumed characters and everything in between. One of the company's most popular offerings is the Spa Diva Party, starting at \$374 for two-hours. "All guests receive the movie star treatment ... girls love the style, flair and accessories," says Sykes, who draws on her experiences as a mom and an art teacher for inspiration in creating party themes, including ones for the under-served population of parents seeking ideas for boys' parties.

Amy Giulian planned a pirate-themed party for her son David's 6th birthday with Kid Parties to Go, complete with a costumed Jack Sparrow and backyard treasure hunts, while Turgeon opted to contract a videogame party for her son, Grant: for approximately \$300, a trailer stocked with several Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii, and PlayStation 3 systems and dozens of video games rolls up to the house, and kids can enjoy a social gaming party for two hours. "There are more companies and party venues out there for girls, but the theme of video games makes it easy for boys to enjoy ... they love the competition and being able to socialize while they play," says Brian Morris, owner of GameTruck Party in Howell; the company has franchises based in Atlantic County and an upcoming location in Cherry Hill. "Parents often tell me that they run out of ideas for parties, and that this was the easiest party they've ever thrown."

Indeed, for many parents, it's not about hosting an over-the-top party, but offering their child and their closest friends the opportunity to celebrate in a unique way. "Because of the prevalence of these unique party venues, parents have the option to make their child's party stand out," Steinberg says. "Kids go to so many birthday parties, and when they've already attended several events at bowling alleys or The Little Gym, you want to do something a little bit different."

"We have many grown-ups who walk into the Groove Lounge and say, 'If I have to go to a jumpy party one more time, I'm going to scream!'" Fischer adds. "Many clients of ours are so excited to be the first family to host a party with us, because no one in their child's class or neighborhood has been to the Groove Lounge yet."

Still, the top priority for many South Jersey parents remains striking that delicate balance

between hosting a child's party that's unique but age-appropriate. "There are parents who plan their kids' parties like they would plan a wedding. Kids have access to the Internet and television and they see these huge parties ... and they want to keep up with the Joneses," Giulian concludes. "But most of us aren't the Joneses."

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